

Transition



Community Vitality

The Internet, Technology and Connectedness

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When people think of the impact of the Internet, two contrasting images may come to mind. One is of a world without borders and an endless amount of knowledge at our fingertips. The other is of a lonely individual, hunched over a computer screen, avoiding all human interaction.

These two images are often at odds. It is undeniable that the proliferation of the Internet and *information and communication technologies* (ICTs) has resulted in many advantages, such as global connectivity and increased access to information. Yet, these technologies have led pundits to worry about the potential decline of social interaction and support within families and communities. If people are spending their time hovering over screens, are they avoiding contact with family, neighbours, and community members?

ICTs facilitate communication between *individuals* – each one with a cellphone and/or Internet connection. This is quite different than the way in which traditional landline phones connected households. Does this mean that family members are turning away from each other and towards their on-screen connections?

Clearly, the intertwined advent of personal computers, mobile phones, and communication networks has changed people's relationship to each other and to information. However, all is not as it appears. While technology provides opportunities and constraints for people's behaviour, it does not determine it, for people remake the possibili-

ties of technology for their own needs.

Recent research has shown that ICTs do not replace face-to-face contact with family or friends. Rather, this technology *adds* to it and *enhances* it, affording household and community members the ability to go their separate ways while staying more connected—by mobile phone, text message, email and IM—as well as by traditional landlines. In such ways, rather than pulling families and communities apart, ICTs often facilitate communication, kinship and integration.

The recent *Telus Canadians and Technology Survey*, conducted in August 2009, illustrates this (Telus kindly shared with the authors some of the findings from this proprietary study of more than 4,000 randomly selected Canadians, aged 13+). The findings show that Canadians believe that ICTs are supporting and enhancing interpersonal connectivity rather than impeding it. The findings show that ICTs enable extra contact, allowing couples both to touch base and co-ordinate their busy lives. These findings support similar results from a 2004-2005 in-depth study of people living in the East York area of Toronto who reported regular use ICTs to orchestrate their household schedules and tasks (The study was done by NetLab, a unit of the Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, and focused on the intersection between communication networks and social networks).

A decade ago, ICTs were a novelty. Now, their widespread availability enables people to use the Internet in

many different ways. They not only communicate with family and friends, they also seek a variety of information, be it for health care, dinner recipes, or planning family vacations.

Families are frequently busy and on the move, and ICTs help them to negotiate the complexities of their routines, schedules and family life. With more women in the labour force, there is a greater need for communication among spouses, parents and children. In many ways, ICTs have filled this gap, keeping people connected as they coordinate household schedules and tasks. Yet, despite this widespread use, ICTs are not weakening family ties and communication. On the contrary, the *Telus Canadians and Technology Survey*, shows that almost all Canadians aged 13+ prefer to speak to their parents face-to-face as well as by phone (see *Figure 1*).

Cell phones enable parents to keep in touch with their children and spouses. For example, a study done by the Pew Internet and American Life Project shows that a majority of adults say technology allows their family life today to be as close, or closer, than when they were growing up. Indeed, 25% of Americans feel that the Internet and cell phones have made their families 'closer' than in days gone by. By contrast, only 11% say their family is not as close as families were in the past. Notably, a majority of adults downplay the impact of technology altogether: 64% feel that new technologies have not made their family any more or less close than families before now.

